Beyond Accumulation: What do artists need to know about Understanding + Envisioning Public Art in Albuquerque?

joni m palmer e: joni.palmer@colorado.edu



Image collage by: joni m palmer

Introductions

I met Sherri Brueggemann, the current manager of the Albuquerque Public Art Urban Enhancement Program, in the fall of 2003. One of Sherri's Bernalillo county colleagues (she managed the county public art program at the time) suggested she would be a good guest critic in a landscape architecture studio I was teaching at UNM's School of Architecture and Planning. The day she visited my studio we began a conversation that has never waned, nor has it ever been uninteresting. These conversations led us to the "revolutionary" idea of assessing the current state of public art in Albuquerque with the intent of envisioning possible futures for public art. I was hired in 2009 to conduct research and create a report that would help the staff think about how the City of Albuquerque's Public Art Program could move forward—at this age in its lifecycle (now in its third decade)—beyond merely accumulating public artworks but rather towards re-envisioning its role in the city. I completed the report—

Beyond Accumulation: Understanding + Envisioning Public Art in Albuquerque—in March of 2011¹. The report is worth reading in its entirety (of course!) as it reveals many different individuals' questions and concerns about, issues with, and ideals of public art in Albuquerque. In this article I will share with you all what I think are some key points from the report that will help you, in your efforts as artists, contribute to public art in Albuquerque.

First, let me provide you with a quick overview of the report. At the outset of my research I set out to accomplish three things: 1) to <u>raise awareness</u> of the program; 2) to <u>assess</u> the current state of the program, in terms of: knowledge, understanding, perceptions, and larger ideas about public art in Albuquerque; and 3) to <u>provide some recommendations</u> for how to improve the program as it moves into its 4th decade. Public art in Albuquerque is the result of the actions of a wide-range of people, in both the public realm (e.g., elected officials, city staff) and the private realm (e.g., business people, individual artists). Therefore, for this research I interviewed local people involved in making public art happen in Albuquerque: city officials and staff, civic stakeholders and businesspeople, and creative professionals. The idea was to not only speak with those who were currently involved and had interests in public art but, more importantly, to meet people who might not already be involved or who might be crucial to invite into the conversation.

The questions I asked people covered three areas:

- 1. *Definitions* + *Valuation*: In this set of questions I was looking to find out how various people defined public art, and then, more specifically, the benefits of, rationale for, and potential projects for the city of Albuquerque.
- 2. *Knowledge of the public art program:* These questions revolved around three main issues: What do people know about the program? How have they come by this knowledge? And, what kinds of interactions do they have with staff?
- 3. The role of urban public arts and public art planning in the planning and design of downtowns: The last set of questions queried people about the role of public art in the city (planning, design, and experience of), and the need for/logic of a public art master plan for the city.

6 Things Artists Should Know

1. Situating the Program

Comparisons of city public art programs are common practice these days, yet I don't believe it is a very productive exercise to compare, for example, public art in Albuquerque with public art in New York City. Not only are these two cities vastly different in terms of population size/demographics, but also in terms of the logistics of public art, and much more. This is what typically results: the comparison of apples to oranges, or, in the vernacular of public art, comparing yuccas and teddy bears.

There is a wide variety of public art programs in this country. Artists can learn a lot by asking questions as a means of gaining a better understanding of a program to which one is submitting qualifications or a proposal.

- How long has the program been in existence? When was it established?
- How is public art funded? e.g. percent-for-art, and, how much is allocated?

¹ A full copy of the report is available on the Public Art Program's website: www.cabq.gov/publicart

- What is the size of collection?
- What is the current budget, and how does this compare to past budgets?
- Where is the program located in the city structure (e.g., Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Cultural Affairs)?
- How many staff are employed (full-time, part-time, consultants, interns)?

Knowing how a program operates and the larger message of the program can help you make decisions about where to put your energies. For example, Philadelphia was the first percent-for-art program in the country (1959). It is known for its murals and iconic pieces of public art works. San Francisco followed, yet it is not known for murals and iconic downtown pieces but rather for its public art installations, projects and programs in urban neighborhoods that respond to diverse needs and communities. Seattle, another substantial and early program, is best know for its edginess, technological savvy, and its commitment to ecology and environment. Other programs that are worth looking at are Calgary's (Canada) program, which recently developed a watershed-based, neighborhood-focused, place-based, multi-scalar master plan. Denver, our nearest peer city, has a program that relies on big pieces, mainly by internationally known artists.

What makes Albuquerque unique amidst all of these programs (not just its peer cities) is the fact that arts and culture here (and in New Mexico) is landscape-inspired, and it is a unique combination of the local and the regional. Albuquerque is a unique city regionally and nationally, because of its location, history, cultural heritage, and also because it is one of just a handful of urban areas in New Mexico.

2. Who are you talking with/to?

In addition, it is very important to think about *who* it is you are talking with: when you are asking questions about the program, when you are presenting a proposal, etc. Through the course of this research I found that disciplinary/occupational biases were strong; that is, the scope of someone's work (their job responsibilities) greatly informed their responses to my questions. The language used and types of responses by individuals within each of the categories of respondents—city officials and staff; civic and business stakeholders; and creative professionals—very often hewed to a common consensus. This is meaningful because it shows how important it is to know the types (i.e., their job titles and responsibilities, as well as their educational and occupational background) of people you are working with so that you can adjust your language appropriately, ask questions that are meaningful to them, and respond in ways that best meet their needs.

3. Public Art: Defining, Contributions, Success?

Many people had not (ever) formulated or articulated a definition of public art. Once I pressed people a bit I did receive a wealth of material, and from this there appears to be 3 ways people define public art: philosophically, prosaically, and administratively.

- A <u>philosophical approach</u> is one that focuses on the possibilities of how art might be public. Philosophical definitions struggle with the relationship between art and public, and question the quality of art by consensus.
- Prosaic definitions are reliant upon a general sense of what art is and how it operates in public space. These definitions are generated by the ordinary circumstances of our lives.

• Finally, ordinances for percent-for-art programs provide a means by which to define public art in an <u>administrative</u>, and thus (somewhat) objective manner.

There are, or course, some overlapping of these approaches to defining public art. Yet for the most part one finds that creative professionals are working with definitions that are philosophical and prosaic. The administrative definition is something they don't feel constricts them (though a couple artists felt that it had the potential of "dumbing-down" the work) but is something they mildly take into account as they refine the design of the piece towards installation. Civic and business stakeholders are for the most part thinking about the prosaic and administrative issues and attributes of public art: these people are concerned about the why and the how of public art. Responses often revolved around accessibility and peripherally relied on the formal or technical aspects of public art (the ordinance). I found that people, in all categories, did not feel restricted by the ordinance but rather, for the civic and business stakeholders and city officials and staff the ordinance was a benchmark, a framework within which to work and possibly to push against (quietly and with intent).

When I asked people what public art contributes to—"does"—for Albuquerque the overwhelming response was: Public art makes Albuquerque a more appealing place to live, work, and play. Several people noted that Albuquerque is a city that is growing up, maturing, becoming more sophisticated, and, as such, we have some big issues, such as concerns about urbanization in an arid environment. How might we use public art to talk about, for example, water issues, and do this in a provocative and beautiful manner? A few people said that public art is just "icing on the cake," that it is something a little extra, but something that differentiates us from our peer cities. Overall, the responses can be organized into to 3 categories: 1) public art contributes to quality of life², 2) city image³, and 3) economics⁴. What appears to be critical at this point in the program's life is that there is a need to educate people about public art: what it is, what it contributes to this community/city, the benefits of public art, and the economic value of public art. Public art can be a draw for people to come to a city, as it suggests a tone or an attitude about how arts and culture are valued.

What makes a piece of public art successful? A majority of people said that a piece/installation does not have to be liked to be successful but rather it has to have an impact. For others, it meant that it "worked": it was viable and durable. And yet others talked about how people responded to it: were they emotionally or intellectually engaged? A few of the consistently mentioned successful pieces were "The Yucca on I-40," "Chevy on a Stick," and "the ribbon at the airport." When I further queried people about *how they knew* a piece was successful I received the following responses:

- when I see people taking a picture of a piece of public art with friends or family;

³ For example, as one interviewee said: "...when you visit a city it is nice to see art (well maintained) where ever you are; it makes you want to be there and stay a bit longer."

4 of 4

² For example: Not only does public art have the potential to give character and texture to public spaces but it also makes them memorable, and thus makes people feel a sense of ownership of city spaces.

⁴ Public art is not just about art in public spaces but also is about the money that public art "puts into economy." But the key, according to both stakeholders and artists, is not to think about public art as ornament but essential to the economic workings of the city: providing opportunities for artists to make a living, as well as all others involved in the production of public art.

- when I hear people telling stories about an installation;
- when it is being used in the educational system (for example, in class assignments and student work).

Successful public art, it seems (from this research), is about engaging people and instilling a sense of pride. Other significant comments revolved around the following (in no particular order): 1) a piece being context sensitive, 2) its ability to enhance and engage a neighborhood/community, 3) the quality of its construction/craftsmanship (e.g., durability, maintenance costs), 4) the capacity for it to stimulate discussion and communication amongst people, and 5) visual, physical, as well as emotional and/or intellectual access to the piece.

4. What is the role and place of public art in urban planning and design of cities?

Recent urban planning research notes the successes of urban planning and design projects that have artists as key members of design and planning teams. If Albuquerque is indeed maturing, then it is essential that "the city" think about the role and place of public art in urban planning and design. There were, though, a handful of interviewees who said that there were more important things than public art in the making of a city. They felt that public art was merely an enhancement, not a necessary element of the city. But, the majority of people said that public art absolutely needs to "be at the table" for any kind of urban planning and design to have an impact (e.g., quality of life, image of the city) on this community. Public art, according to most of the respondents, is what makes a city (at all scales) interesting and livable (safety issues come into the conversation here). Who needs to be involved in creating an environment that is attractive to people, businesses and institutions (looking for a place to visit and/or relocate)? Based on this research, multiple departments and individuals need to work much more closely with one another in order for public art to not be a piecemeal project (which it often is) that is inserted as an afterthought.

5. Participating in + Contributing to the Public Art Program in Albuquerque

From the beginning of this conversation Sherri and I recognized that there are multiple ways someone might participate in and contribute to public art in Albuquerque. What I found was that there are myriad ways people are involved in making public art happen in this city, for example: informing, consulting, creating, involving, collaborating, coordinating, empowering, supporting, acting, and implementing. It is not just a fact of a job description but, what people "do" on a daily and weekly basis. The list below is compiled, in no particular order, from the interviews, and catalogs the many different activities by which people participate in and contribute to—directly or indirectly—the production of public art in Albuquerque. From this list one can learn (and think) about the potential ways to be engaged in the work of public art.

implementing, managing, inspecting, reporting, marketing, planning, directing, grant writing, fund raising, administration, tracking, project management, support, advisory, overseeing, project coordinating, liaison, education, outreach, programming, design, planning, curating, enabling (others to do their jobs), creating, making, telling stories, facilitate, construction administration, strategic planning, design and construction management

According to the majority of artists I have spoken with (this includes more than the artists I interviewed for this research), they do more than (just) make art. I believe that it is

important for artists to acknowledge that a working artist is also involved in: advocating for the arts, supporting other artists, fabricating and installing work (one's own and others), as well as educating people. It is important that artists take these roles and responsibilities seriously so that others will take them (and the arts) seriously. This will prompt people to make an attempt to better understand how artists and the arts are beneficial to society at many levels.

Finally, if you want to participate in and contribute to public art in Albuquerque in a more meaningful manner, you need to have some knowledge of the program. I found that a surprising number of people I interviewed said they had very little knowledge of the program, other than the fact that it existed. The majority of people knew of the program, and knew certain components of the program (e.g., they knew a staff member, had a favorite piece, knew there was an Arts Board), but they did not know details about the program (e.g. how it was funded, how pieces were selected). How do people obtain this knowledge of the program? I found that people with at least a partial knowledge had been involved in the process or knew someone who was a participating artist or a staff member. Unfortunately, the majority of people felt that the public either did not know the public art program existed or knew very little, particularly about how it was funded and how pieces were selected, which means there is a great deal of room for misinformation and misconceptions. I raise this point in order to prompt anyone reading this article to raise awareness about the program and educate people about the process and the collection!

Some Final Thoughts...

Something I learned from this research is that compared to other cities, Albuquerque residents are likely to use words like landscape, place, neighborhoods, New Mexico (arts, culture, heritage), and pride when talking about public art. These are not a typical set of terms people use when talking about public art in U.S. in cities. That people in Albuquerque use terms that so firmly *ground* them *here* seems significant to how this city imagines itself into the 21st century.

I was asked to find a way to present some of the more salient points of *Beyond Accumulation: Understanding* + *Envisioning Public Art in Albuquerque* to artists in a way that would be meaningful and thus useful to artists attending this spring 2011 workshop. I hope this piece proves helpful in providing you with some things to think about as you engage in public art work in Albuquerque (and beyond). Best of luck in all of your public art endeavors!